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RUEHMN/AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO 2068
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ 2905
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO 1796
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RUEABND/DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMIN HQ WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 SAO PAULO 000751

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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: SNAPSHOT OF PRISON CHAOS IN SAO PAULO STATE

REF: (A) SAO PAULO 526; (B) 05 SAO PAULO 975; (C) SAO PAULO 319

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED - PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: For the past month, Sao Paulo prison officials have been housing over 1400 prisoners in an open yard designed to hold about 160 people in the Araraquara prison in northern Sao Paulo state. No AmCits are currently housed in Araraquara, but one AmCit is being held in somewhat similar conditions at the Itirapina prison. The current dire situation at Araraquara developed over the last six weeks, as authorities incrementally compressed the inmates into smaller and smaller available space after several inmate riots and a discovered tunnel left most of the prison facilities unusable. With chronic overcrowding and decimated facilities, the situation at Araraquara is emblematic of Sao Paulo's ailing prison system, and much of Brazil's, even as the federal government touts its new prison in Parana state - the first federal prison to open in Brazil - as a model penitentiary. As part of our ongoing outreach strategy, we will host a group from ICITAP next month to evaluate possible USG technical assistance programs, and we are organizing a seminar on crime, justice and prison administration issues bringing together U.S. experts, local civil society representatives, and state security officials. END SUMMARY.

LIKE SARDINES IN A CAN

¶2. (SBU) Prison authorities at the Araraquara facility in northern Sao Paulo state near Riberao Preto have been housing more than 1,400 inmates in a single, open-air yard designed to hold only about 160 persons at any given time. Officials say they were forced to lock the entire prison population into this yard after several riots that began during the PCC crime wave of mid-May (ref A) left the rest of the institution virtually in ruins. No AmCits are currently incarcerated in Araraquara.

¶3. (SBU) This most recent Sao Paulo prison saga began on May 13, when prisoners took over a state-of-the-art temporary holding center

(CDP) located just inside the main entrance to the Araraquara Prison in an uprising that lasted 28 hours. The riot coincided with 70 others that occurred in prisons throughout Sao Paulo state in conjunction with a wave of violence launched by the organized crime ring the First Capital Command (PCC), which is based in the Sao Paulo prisons and operates both inside and outside of prison walls (ref B). The holding center, known as the Annex, was destroyed in the riot, and 600 prisoners were moved to the main prison area on May 15.

14. (U) Then another riot broke out a month later in the main prison, and inmates destroyed virtually all of the cell blocks, referred to as pavilions, in the facility. As a result, the entire prison population of around 1,450 inmates was moved into the Annex on June 16. The Annex has four equal-sized yards approximately 90 feet square, surrounded by cells that open to the yards. Each of these quadrants holds approximately 160 inmates, or about 650 total prisoners. The prisoners were initially kept in a single yard of the Annex because of the destruction caused in May, but an adjoining yard was opened on June 23.

15. (SBU) But on July 3, twenty-five inmates were caught by police trying to escape through a tunnel originating in one the yards in the Annex. Consequently, all 1450 inmates were again squeezed into a single quadrant, and all the doors to the yard were locked and welded shut. The plight of these prisoners is now being widely covered in Sao Paulo press after the daily newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo reported on July 6 that food is simply tossed into the yard from the rooftop, and sick inmates are not being adequately treated. It is reported that inmates freed from incarceration by court order must be hoisted out by rope because guards will not re-open the sealed doors. Aerial photos in several daily papers show a mass of almost naked prisoners crammed into the open yard under the blazing

SAO PAULO 00000751 002 OF 004

sun, with apparently sick and injured inmates lying prone in the center.

NOT EXACTLY "EXTREME MAKEOVER"

16. (SBU) In a bit of real-life drama befitting a Brazilian soap opera, Hosmany Ramos, a former socialite plastic surgeon infamously imprisoned in Araraquara for murder, kidnapping, drug trafficking and robbery, has given newspaper and television interviews via cell phone regarding conditions in the Annex yard. Ramos said he has been treating inmates almost around the clock because prison doctors refuse to enter the yard. Medicine has been scarce, he said, especially HIV/AIDS cocktail treatments, which is of particular concern because HIV positive inmates have been housed in the yard alongside inmates suffering from tuberculosis and hepatitis. Ramos said that two-thirds of the inmates have serious colds and show no signs of improving. These conditions are exacerbated by the fact that inmates must sleep outdoors with no blankets, in many cases leaning on each other for support and warmth. He said he even pulled a rotten tooth from an inmate using a nail and a shoe as a hammer.

17. (SBU) Reports indicate that there is no power to the yard, and with only a few working toilets, inmates are forced to relieve themselves in bags that are stacked in a corner. Surprisingly, some prisoners who have managed to give interviews have said that fights do not break out within the yard and that the inmates are keeping the yard and themselves as clean as possible for fear of infection or an outbreak of a communicable illness.

PATHETIC, BUT NO PLACE TO GO

18. (SBU) As promised by Sao Paulo Governor Claudio Lembo, 107 sick inmates were moved on Friday, July 7, from the common yard, but not very far; they were moved into an adjacent yard and treated there by a team of medical personnel. Prison officials stated that none of the sick inmates suffered from conditions warranting

hospitalization, so none would be removed from the Araraquara grounds.

¶9. (SBU) Governor Lembo, at first, sounded a rather unsympathetic tone regarding conditions at Araraquara, laying blame for the dire situation squarely on the backs of the prisoners themselves, whose riots and destructive behavior forced prison authorities to resort to locking the inmates in a single yard. But after a couple of days of vivid news reports, the Governor became more conciliatory, calling the situation "pathetic" and saying that it is only human to feel some shame for the plight of the prisoners. He was quick to opine, as he did during the crime wave of May, that the entire Sao Paulo community must share in the responsibility for the shame. The director of Araraquara also said the prisoners should not be moved because they will simply rebel and destroy facilities anew. He said he had decided to keep the prisoners in the yard "not to be cruel, but disciplined."

¶10. (SBU) Regardless of prison policy, the Governor maintains that there will be no transfers from Araraquara in the near future, simply because there is no penal facility left in Sao Paulo that can handle any significant influx of prisoners. The prisons of Itirapina and Mirandopolis, for example, also have more than 1000 prisoners each being held in single pavilions designed to hold only hundreds of inmates. (NOTE: One AmCit is being held at Itirapina. Prison officials told us on Monday, July 10, that there has been no uprising or unusually difficult conditions recently, and the AmCit prisoner was visited by a Conoff on May 30 at which time he made no complaints regarding prison conditions. END NOTE). And the Pracinha Prison is holding 1400 inmates, twice its designed capacity. In fact, the current Sao Paulo State prison population

SAO PAULO 00000751 003 OF 004

hovers at around 125,650, in a system designed for 95,645, which means the system is about 23 percent over-capacity. Added to that, at least 19 of 144 facilities were destroyed or suffered serious damage since the riots of May. The new Secretary for Prison Administration, Antonio Ferreira Pitno, said last week that 12,000 to 15,000 inmates are currently housed in "precarious conditions." It is estimated that the repairs to Araraquara alone will cost over USD 7 million. Governor Lembo said that repairs to the main prison at Araraquara are scheduled to begin on Monday, July 10.

SOME RELIEF SOON, BUT ONLY A DROP IN THE BUCKET

¶11. (SBU) State officials announced that Sao Paulo has requested to send forty inmates to the new Catanduvas federal prison in Parana state (ref C). Catanduvas, which just became operational in June, is Brazil's first federal prison, and is being touted by federal officials as state-of-the-art. Two-hundred video cameras will assist some 170 guards monitor 200 inmates. Each wing of the prison boasts X-rays and other scanners that will be able to detect eight types of narcotics, ten types of explosives, nine types of chemical warfare agents, and eight types of industrial chemicals that might be used as an explosive, and the scanners are said to be able to detect these agents in particulates as small as vapor.

¶12. (SBU) Sao Paulo's Prison Secretary said that the majority of the 40 spots he requested in Catanduvas will be for PCC members, but he would not confirm whether the gang's top boss, known as Marcola, will be transferred. Moving Marcola out of Sao Paulo will be a tough decision to make; it was the transfer of 750 PCC leaders, including Marcola, to high security facilities in rural Sao Paulo state that sparked the prison riots and crime wave in May (ref A). And such mayhem is not new to Brazilian prison authorities; on Christmas Day 2005, for example, some 200 hostages - mostly family members of inmates - were held for a week in the Urso Branco prison in Rondonia state after a gang leader had been moved to a more secure facility. The stand-off ended when state officials relented and returned the leader to Urso Branco. After the Sao Paulo uprisings in May, Marcola was deposed by a special investigative commission of the national Congress, during which he claimed that he negotiated with police for the resolution of the crime wave. In a recent interview, the director of the Araraquara prison lamented

"the prisoners treat Marcola as God. They worship the guy."

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: Prisons in Sao Paulo, and throughout Brazil, are notoriously overcrowded and poorly managed. Corruption among prison employees is rampant (refs A and C), and major organized crime rings are actually based behind bars. Added to that, periodic riots - ironically, sometimes sparked by prisoner calls for better conditions -- leave sections of prisons almost completely destroyed, creating even more pressure on an already simmering cauldron of crime and violence. Even administrative decisions as basic as prisoner transfers often result in chaos and bloodshed both within the prison system and on the streets of Sao Paulo. And the chaos is not limited to overcrowding; police recently found drugs in the highest security prison in Sao Paulo state, and they uncovered a plan to hide drugs and weapons within soccer balls that would be sent into prisons via official procurement channels. The new federal prison may help, but with only 200 spaces, at best it will provide a release-valve for states to deal with their worst offenders, and then, only if authorities are able to get their prisoners to Catanduvas at all.

¶14. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED. As part of our ongoing outreach strategy, we have discussed with Sao Paulo State's Secretary of Public Security possible areas of technical assistance the USG might be able to offer regarding prison administration and anti-gang efforts. To that end, a group from the U.S. Department of Justice's International Criminal Investigative Training Program (ICITAP), coordinated through the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), will visit Sao Paulo at the beginning of

SAO PAULO 00000751 004 OF 004

August to evaluate the situation here. Also, our Public Diplomacy section is organizing a two-day seminar with four U.S. experts and over 100 Brazilian civil society representatives and state security officials to share best practices on issues of crime, justice, and prison administration, among other security related topics. Septels with details to follow. END COMMENT.

¶15. (U) This cable was coordinated/cleared with Embassy Brasilia.

MCMULLEN